

Cargo containers get new life in Oak Park classrooms

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The new classrooms that opened late last month at Oak Park High School show few signs of their life on the sea.

Only the exterior walls and indoor ceilings hint that the seven classrooms were formed from 40-foot steel cargo containers shipped across the ocean to California this year. Nor are they dark boxes. Inside, students and teachers see finished walls and floor-to-ceiling windows that flood the rooms with light.

Math teacher Robin Midiri also likes their strength. They were built from cargo containers designed to withstand more than 200 tons of weight stacked on top of them.

"If there's going to be an earthquake, I want to be at work," she said.

Officials from GrowthPoint Structures of Santa Monica approached state regulators four years ago with the idea for container school buildings.

After extensive review, the office of the Division of the **State Architect** approved GrowthPoint's plans for the 960-square-foot classrooms. They are the first state-approved classrooms made of recycled sea containers, said Doug Humphrey, regional manager for the state agency that scrutinizes building plans for schools.

Humphrey said containers are used extensively in Europe to build homes, schools and dormitories, but did not know how common they were nationally. Locally, affordable housing advocates and educators are intrigued by the possibilities.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is studying the feasibility of using containers to build 20 to 40 apartments in Oxnard to house people emerging from homelessness. Housing Director Ron Mulvihill sees the energy-efficient buildings made largely from reclaimed materials as an option because they can be built quickly and at low cost.

"We have to fast-track some of these lower-cost housing options," he said.

Eric Engheben, who co-founded GrowthPoint, said the Oak Park project is a dream come true for him. The Topanga man said when he graduated with a construction degree in the mid-1980s, he wanted to develop housing that someone just coming out of college could afford.

Ultimately, he began experimenting with containers and established the company with CEO Preston Clark six years ago. They spent the first years in research and development. Then, after completing a two-story private home in San Bernardino

County, they took their idea for building schools to the **state architect** 's office.

After the final approvals came through, the project was on. Workers built the classrooms in 60 days in GrowthPoint's Los Angeles factory. Construction crews installed them on the campus in three weeks, bolting and welding them to the concrete foundation. The line of classrooms stretches 168 feet, half the length of a football field.

Oak Park Superintendent Tony Knight said the \$2 million project was completed at perhaps a third of the cost of conventional construction and in a fraction of the time. They're designed to last 50 years, longer than the 30- to 35-year-old portable classrooms they replaced.

They're expected to produce more energy than they consume with the aid of solar panels on the roof, officials said.

"This is the iPad of modular buildings," said Keith Henderson, construction manager for Balfour Beatty Construction, which installed the classrooms.

Most of the millions of containers that ships carry into and out of the large ports in the San Pedro Bay are reused to transport goods, said Phillip Sanfield, spokesman for the Port of Los Angeles.

But some are sold and converted into homes, restaurants and now school buildings. The 21 cargo containers used at Oak Park came into the Port of Long Beach after being used once, said an official at W&K Container, the San Francisco company that sold them to GrowthPoint. They cost about \$5,000 each, Engheben said.

Each classroom has three cargo containers in the structure. Students see the pastel-painted drywall on the inside of the classroom, but behind that are heavy-duty insulation and then the cargo steel exterior.

Energy savings were a priority for district officials. Sensors detect the body temperature of the occupants, automatically triggering the air conditioning. The floor-to-ceiling windows are dual glazed. The roof is designed to keep the temperature down on a hot day.

Taylor Chock-Wong, a 17-year-old senior from Camarillo, said the classrooms reminded her of a spaceship.

"They're very classy," she said. "It was nice to come into a classroom that was very modern."